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PUBLIC ATTIDUES REFLECT THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT INVOLVEMENT IN CHILD CARE PROGRAMS

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Public Attitudes Reflect the Federal Government Involvement in Child Care Programs*

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ABSTRACT

In spite of the pressing need for good day care programs resulting mainly from a dramatic increase in the number of working mothers, there is no (federal) program of child care in the United States, except for the very poor. From the hypothesis that the lack of government response to growing day care needs reflects negative public attitudes toward federal involvement, the attitudes of 100 Clear Lake City residents were examined by mailed questionnaires. The responses to these questionnaires reveal a close similarity between respondents' attitudes toward federal involvement in child care programs and actual federal involvement in such programs. If the Clear Lake City sample is representative of the general public, then government policy is consistant with public attitudes.

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Child care needs have been attracting increasing public attention in recent years. Several of the major reasons for this are (1) the growth in the number of employed mothers, (2) the increasing recognition that young children benefit from good group experience and early education, especially for economically and culturally disadvantaged children, (3) the realization that child care services must be available if families on welfare are to be helped to move toward economic self-sufficiency, (4) the Women's Movement which regards day care as a key element in allowing women to pursue careers on an equal basis with men, and (5) the increasing number of nuclear families, which made grandparents or other relatives less available for child care duties.

These factors are discussed below.

Increased Number of Employed Mothers

In the last few decades the number of employed mothers at all income levels has increased dramatically, causing concern about the large number of children who need care while their mothers work. In 1966, 3.8 million mothers with children under 6 were employed and in 1975 the number rose to 5.4 million. (U.S. Department of Labor, 1976:4)

There are several reasons for increasing participation in the labor force by women. First of all, economic necessity compels many mothers to seek jobs. The earnings of mothers lifted many families out of poverty and made it possible to avoid the hardships of economic deprivation. Mothers who are the heads of families have even more pressing reasons to seek employment than other employed wives. In 1973, of all families with children 13 percent were headed by females due to the nation's high and rising divorce rate (Committee on Finance, 1974:5).

The rise in educational level of women is also one of the contributing factors to the increasing labor force participation of women. Nearly 20 percent of women 25 years old or over had completed some college in 1972, compared to 16 percent 10 years earlier (Ruderman, 1968:3). Changing attitude about women's role is also one of the contributing factors. The idea that women should be individuals with lives and careers of their own, not exclusively wives and mothers is gaining ground.

Another factor is the expanding economy that created more job opportunities for women, particularly white-collar and service positions. Other demographic changes such as decline in mortality rates, decline of median age of women at the birth of the last child, rising life expectancy, and smaller number of children per family increased the number of years left for women to go to work after their children have grown up.

As the number of employed mothers increases, so does the number of children with employed mothers.

The Importance of Early Child Development

In addition to the rapidly growing need for child care facilities for children of employed mothers, parents are beginning to realize that preschool education and development programs are needed for the physical, emotional, and intellectual development of their youngsters (Roby, 1973:4). Educators and psychologists have found (Bloom, 1964, Hunt, 1961) that a child's development during the early years of life is of crucial importance to later growth.

Specialists in early childhood development began to realize the need for preschool education and development programs for the physical, emotional,

and intellectual development of all youngsters. They regard good group experiences as very desirable for the young children and feel quite sure that children benefit from them (Roby, 1973:10). Many people see day care facilities as a means of helping children lay a good foundation for later school work and for later social relationship.

However, existing public policy has very little to offer either the parents of a preschool child or the child himself in the way of education. Public intervention into the development process does not begin until age six.

Welfare Reform

In about 1966, welfare rolls began rapidly increasing. The number of recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) rose between 1966 and 1969 from 5.5 million to 6.7 million, while expenditures on AFDC program rose from 1.8 billion to 3.5 billion over the three-year period (Schultz, 1972:276). In the hope of halting the escalation in costs, welfare reform plans have been passed in Congress during the 1960's and 70's. These plans were designed to get welfare mothers into work or work-training and were motivated by the concept of "self-sufficiency" and belief that all "able-bodied" welfare recipients should be required to work. Since lack of day care facilities for their children was seen as one of the major barriers to increasing the employment of welfare mothers, these plans included day care provisions.

While many question the economic rationale of requiring women to take low paying jobs while their children must be placed in either expensive or low quality day care programs (Kihss, 1971; Schultze, 1974:276), the welfare issue remains tied to the issue of day care program expansion.

Day care is a crucial issue in the women's movement which is fighting to bring women into full and active participation in the mainstream of American society. The National Organization for Women (NOW), the largest organization within the women's movement is committed actively to the creation of universally available, publicly supported, developmental child care. They argue that the public has a responsibility to provide adequate child care arrangements so that mothers will have a genuine choice between staying at home and going to work.

As mothers find stimulating, educational environments in which to function, so do children. Young children need peer relationships, additional adult models, enriched educational programs. Good quality day care facilities would serve the purpose for both mothers and children.

In spite of the increasing demand of extra-family day care, there were only about 1 million capacities in licensed or approved day care centers and day care homes in 1972 according to the statistics of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (Committee on Finance, 1974:59). As a result, very few of them receive care through any organized day care program. According to a survey conducted in 1965 by the Department of Labor and Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, about half the children under six were cared for in their own homes by their father (14%), another relative (18%), or by a non-relative, such as a babysitter or maid (15%) (Committee on Finance, 1974:152). About 30 percent of them received care in someone else's home, about half from a relative, and the rest from a nonrelative. Only about 6 percent of the preschool children were in day care centers. The same survey reported that

nearly one million children under 14 were "latch-key kids" who looked after themselves while their mothers worked.

Another issue is day care quality.

Only 1 percent of the proprietary centers and 9 percent of the non-profit centers observed provided what the National Council of Jewish Women regarded as truly developmental care (Keyserling, 1972:63) including educational, health, nutritional, and social services where needed.

Under these circumstances, many employed mothers are faced with the difficulty of obtaining adequate care for their children. The day care they can afford in the private market place does not meet their standards of adequate quality. An increasing number of families who need day care for their children are too well off to be eligible for subsidized day care and cannot find good unsubsidized care at a price they can afford. Dissatisfaction with present day care arrangements has increased the demand for greater public responsibility and subsidy for day care.

GOVERNMENT INVOLVEMENT IN DAY CARE - PAST AND PRESENT

Historical records for day care in the United States date back to the mid-nineteenth century, when industrialization and urbanization took many women who needed to work away from the home and into the factory. The day care services of these early days were called day nurseries and their primary concern was physical care of the children. In the closing decades of the nineteenth century, as millions of immigrant families migrated into large cities from overseas, the day nurseries spread from one city to another. In 1916 the number was 695 (Rothman, 1973:16). However, there was no federal government involvement in these programs.

Federal involvement in day care began during the Depression of the 1930's with the creation of nursery schools financed by the federal government under the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) and later the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Early in 1938 the WPA estimated that more than 200,000 children of low-income families benefited from these schools. (Pidgeon, 1974:678).

The WPA nurseries were notable in two respects. First, for the first time public funds, both federal and state, became available for day care. Secondly, the WPA nursery schools were intended as educational institution and were identified primarily as an educational service, rather than as a custodial service (U.S. Advisory Committee on Education, 1974:1597).

As the country moved toward greater prosperity and WPA was no longer necessary as a source of employment, day care programs were phased out. The day nurseries declined in numbers.

The next great national emergency, World War II, again occasioned the establishment of federally supported day care centers. Since the government wanted to maximize the number of women who could work, such care would serve as an incentive to attract women to war industries and keep them on the job. Accordingly, in August 1942 the federal government appropriated funds for the day care centers under the Lanham Act, or as it was called the Community Facilities Bill.[1]

The growth of the day care centers after the Lanham Act was tremendous (Rothman, 1973:20). It has been estimated that roughly 550,000 to 600,000 different children received care at one time or another during the period

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[1]The Lanham Act, approved October 14, 1940, and amended in 1941, 1942, and 1943, was named after its sponsor, Rep. Fritz Garland Lanham (D-Tex.).

of the Lanham Act (Pidgeon, 1974:678). After the war, the number of centers decreased. The federal government stopped funding the day care centers on February 28, 1946.

In spite of the expectation that mothers would return to their "places" after the war, many women did not give up their jobs, and many more continued to enter the labor force. The increase of employed mothers took place without the federal assistance of day care centers and without any public demand for such assistance.

The 1960's ushered in another period of federal involvement in day care. In 1962 the Social Security Amendment provided the first federal funding for day care since World War II. Currently there are more than sixty federally supported child care programs. The nature, funding, and expenditure of major programs are displayed in Table 1.

In looking over the review of federal involvement in the support of day care services, there are several points to be noticed.

First, existing federal programs for child development and day care services are focused almost exclusively on economically disadvantaged children. Even among those poor children to whom the federal programs are explicitly aimed, the slots are very few. According to Keyserling, in the early 1970's, federal funds for day care provided services for fewer than 5 percent of the children of low-income families most in need (Keyserling, 1972:2-4).

Secondly, funds for day care for the poor are almost always contingent upon participation in the labor force or some training program in preparation for full-time employment.

TABLE 1 MAJOR FEDERAL CHILD CARE PROGRAMS

	Social Security Act			Economic Opportunity Act		
	AFDC	WIN	CWS	Head Start	CEP	Migrant & Seasonal Farmworkers
Estimated expenditure for fiscal 1975 (millions)	487.6	47.3	1.8	430	10.0	1.6
Federal share	75%	90%	variable	80% (100% in poor area)	90%	100%
Administering agency						
Federal	Dept. of HEW Community Service Administration			Dept. of HEW Office of Child Development	Dept. of Labor Manpower Administration	Dept. of Labor
State	Welfare Department				State Employment Service	prime sponsor
Local	Welfare Department			CAA or single purpose agency	CAA	CAA or single purpose agency

SOURCES: Women's Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor, Federal Funds for Day Care Projects (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972); Committee on Finance, Child Care Data and Materials (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1974).

TABLE 1 - Continued

Elementary & Secondary Education Act			Miscellaneous support		
Title I	Migrant program	Follow through	Indian child welfare	Child development program	Small Business Act
	51.3		6.5	12.3	3.8 (1974)
100%	100%	80%			90%
	Dept. of HEW Office of Education		Dept. of Interior Bureau of Indian Affairs	Appalachian Regional Commission	Small Business Administration
State Education Agency	prime sponsor	prime sponsor			
Local Education Agency	prime sponsor	prime sponsor			

Thirdly, federal policy for child care, funded through more than 60 programs, is disjointed and fragmentary.

Finally, it seems that the federal government has been trying to stay out of the business of actively attacking the problem of quality day care shortage.

As discussed earlier, past federal involvement in day care occurred only in times of emergency, such as the Depression and World War II, and its present involvement is aimed at economically disadvantaged children. While many groups are demanding federal support for day care, it seems that they are not heard in the formulation of government policy. It is assumed that the public on the whole are opposed to federal support of day care, and that this negative attitude is successfully reflected in the government policy.

Based on these assumptions, the attitude of Clear Lake City residents toward day care was examined as a case study. Clear Lake City is a southeastern suburb in Houston, Texas. The majority of its population are white and middle-class.

A CASE STUDY OF CLEAR LAKE CITY

The purpose of this case study is to examine the public attitude toward federal government involvement in child care programs. There were 100 of the residents (50 males and 50 females) selected randomly from 1977 Southwestern Bell Telephone Directory and were mailed questionnaires. Among the fifty-seven respondents, 38 (67%) were females and 19 (33%) were males.

Their median age was 37. As to their marital status, 46 (82%) were married, 4 (7%) were single, 5 (9%) were divorced, 1 (1%) widowed and 1 (1%) separated. Of al the respondents, 13 (23%) finished high school, 17 (30%) attended some college, 16 (28%) finished four-year college, and 11 (19%) completed graduate school or more (Table 2).

The questionnaire consisting of twenty-two items was designed by the authors. The first eight questions centered on demographic information, such as sex, age, marital status, education, income, employment, and ages of their children. Questions 9-13 inquired into their opinions about employed mothers, and questions 14-20 were about child care arrangements in general and as applied to their own situations. The last two questions asked what role the federal government should play in day care.

Result of the Case Study

The results can be derived from the analysis of three major areas gathered from the study of the questionnaires.

A. Sample's attitude toward employed mothers:

More than half of the sample had positive evaluation concerning the trend of increasing employment of married women. As to the motives for married women working outside the home are concerned, two major reasons are found - - financial needs and personal fulfilment. This seems to imply that a substantial fraction of women employed are due to economic necessity rather than personal choice. 53 per cent of the respondents were in favor of full-time employed father and part-time employed mother, while no one suggested the opposite arrangement -- full-time employed mother and part-time employed father. It is suggested that the traditional stereotype role played by mothers as sole care-takers remains firm in Clear Lake City.

TABLE 2

EMPLOYMENT STATUS AND AGES OF YOUNGEST CHILDREN

Marital status	Employment status	Total		Ages of youngest children									
				Under 6		6-11		11-17		Over 18		No children	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Married	both full time	18	33	4	28	1	14	5	28	2	40	6	67
	mother part time father full time	10	18	4	28	-	-	4	22	-	-	2	22
	mother not employed father full time	17	31	4	28	4	58	6	34	2	40	1	11
	mother full time father not employed	1	1	-	-	1	14	-	-	-	-	-	-
Divorced	mother full time	3	5	-	-	1	14	2	11	-	-	-	-
	mother part time	1	1	1	8	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	mother not employed	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	20	-	-
Separated	mother full time	1	1	1	8	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Widowed	mother full time	1	1	-	-	-	-	1	5	-	-	-	-
Single	female full time	2	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	male full time	2	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total		57	100	14	100	7	100	18	100	5	100	9	100

B. Sample's opinions about child care arrangement:

When both parents were employed, more than half of the children found in the study to be kept in profit or non-profit day care centers. Nearly half of these employed parents indicated that finding day care facilities for their children was a difficult task. Ninety-three per cent of the total sample expressed their favoritism in providing good quality day care services to all needed children. However, 86 per cent of the respondents suggested that the parents or "those who use them" should pay for day care program.

C. Federal government involvement in day care programs:

Since a majority of the respondents (86 per cent) believed that parents should be responsible for child care and pay for it, this indicated that federal government involvement would probably be undesirable. Nevertheless, 44 per cent of the sample responded favorably to federal involvement with various conditions while only 7 per cent of them supported the idea without any reservation. The comments against federal involvement centered on "efficiency" and "fear of state control".

On the issue of whether government should provide subsidy for day care centers for poor children, 62 per cent had positive response while 23 per cent had negative response. Those who favored the general idea of government involvement also supported government day care subsidies for poor children. Also many respondents who did not support government involvement in general, nonetheless, favored subsidies for day care for poor children in particular.

Discussion of the Results

An analysis of responses reveals a close similarity between respondents' attitudes toward federal involvement in child care programs and actual federal

involvement in such programs. The majority's opinion that federal government should be involved in day care only in case of poor families is reflected in the current government child care policy. If this limited sample is close to general public reluctance toward federal involvement in day care, then the demand that federally supported day care programs be made available for all children is minimal.

Why should the public show such little concern for federal involvement in day care program except for the economically disadvantaged children? In the days when day care is viewed as "the most neglected field of child welfare," why is public interest in enlarging day care so minimal? From the responses of the questionnaire and other literatures, this lack of public interest in day care program will be examined.

The negative view of employed mothers, especially mothers of young children, is probably one of the major obstacles to increased public support for day care programs.

Comments such as the following are illustrative. "Mothers of preschool children should stay home," or "There is no substitute for a mother in early years." Most experts in the field of child development also think that the ideal place for the preschool child is home with his or her mother (Cole, 1971:84). The assumption underlying such opposition to employed mothers with young children is that separation of mother and child, especially during pre-school years, is detrimental to the child's welfare. One of the main sources for this belief came from John Bowlby's Maternal Care and Mental Health (1952). Bowlby's findings led to the belief that it may be harmful for a mother to work when her children are very young. This belief greatly discouraged the development of day care centers for children during the 1950's and much of the 1960's (Roby, 1973:59).

However, as several millions of employed mothers began to consider day care centers as the solution to their child care problems, research on the effects of maternal deprivation has come under re-examination. In reviewing recent research on the effects of day care and home care on the development of children, Urie Bronfenbrenner concluded that so far as intellectual growth during the preschool years is concerned, the existing evidence does not justify claims for the superiority of one setting over another (Bronfenbrenner, 1976:122). Again, according to Susan Cheever, recent studies have concluded that children who are well cared for outside the home develop just as well as those cared for by their mothers (1976:76). Jerome Kagan, a Harvard psychologist, thinks that day care centers might even be superior to a home experience when it comes to building up the preschool child's confidence and permitting him to explore (Cole, 1971:84). One conclusion that can be drawn from current research is that day care per se does not cause problems, although the quality of the care probably does.

However, there are many questions about which the public are concerned. Such as the question of whether day care is good for infants and toddlers from adequate homes, in which they receive good maternal attention remains unanswered. Also many people are occupied with unnecessary and false fears about the effects of separation on children, as seen in some responses to the questionnaire. The educators, psychologists, and other professional experts must answer many unanswered questions and their findings should influence the public and the question of expanding day care.

The second reason for public reluctance toward federal support of day care program lies in the belief that the child rearing responsibility of parents cannot be shared with others. At present, almost all of the responsibility

for rearing children in the first five or six years of life falls on parents. The idea that child care is the exclusive responsibility and privilege of individual parents remains very firm in the minds of the respondents to the questionnaire. Most respondents believe that couples, once they have children, should bear full responsibility for child care.

Many parents themselves feel reluctant to turn over the care of their children to others, because this may be interpreted neglecting their responsibility. They are reluctant to admit they need help, to say nothing of turning to the federal government for help and demanding tax-dollars for child care. Only when they cannot bear their responsibility by any means, do they conclude it is permissible to ask for help. These views are reflected in the responses to the question focusing on the role of the federal government in day care programs. As many as half the respondents said the government should not be involved in day care programs. Even among those who favored government, only a small percentage did so without condition.

When asked how much time parents should work when both of them are employed, half of the respondents said that father should work full-time but mothers should work part-time. Respondents are saying that women should not work full-time since the responsibility to take care of children at home is theirs. In the overwhelming majority of the respondents' families, mothers take care of children in the day time. Women have been socialized to believe that mothers have a duty to remain at home to care for their children and that leaving this responsibility to anyone else constitutes a "sinful state of affairs." These attitudes are also responsible for the lack of day care support.

Thirdly, historically day care facilities were established to care children from poor families or troubled families that could not carry out their child care responsibilities. It has been shown that almost all the current federal day care programs are focused on poor families. As a result of this, the public have come to view day care as a provision for poor children or children from incompetent families. This view is seen in the responses to the questionnaire.

However, the problem of day care is not a problem of the poor only. It is also a problem of the normal, middle-class, or lower middle-class families where both parents are employed. Day care is a normal need in a modern technological society (Fein, 1973:28), or a provision established in response to changing social needs, rather than a service for underprivileged or inadequate people (Ruderman, 1968:15). As long as there exists the concept of day care as child welfare services for poor or troubled families rather than as a basic right of all children, attempts to enlarge day care services to cover broader segments of children in normal, adequate families will meet resistance. Widespread need or desire for day care among normal, competent families will not be met.

Fourthly, the argument that day care is unnatural and weakens the family is often heard. In fact, this argument has existed from the beginning of day care, though day care services have never attempted or unwittingly managed to destroy the family (Steinfels, 1973:218). There are many complex factors surrounding the effects of day care upon the family, and these effects cannot be reduced to a simple "Yes," or "No." According to Steinfels, day care will have a substantial impact on the family, the extent and nature of which depend on decisions yet to be made about the control, financing, administration, and programming of day care services.

IMPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

If the study of Clear Lake City is representative of public attitudes, most of the public are not familiar with the existing child care needs of working mothers and believe that current informal child care arrangements are satisfactory. When asked of the difficulty in finding affordable, good quality day care facilities, only 10% said "very difficult" or "difficult" and another 10% responded "not difficult." Others simply do not know what the day care situation is today. Such ignorance about day care situation is another reason for lack of community interest in day care.

If the responses to the questionnaire are indicative of the general public, then the public's negative image of the federal government also seems to contribute to the reluctance to support federal involvement in day care programs. The foremost objection against the federal government is its "inefficiency," as seen in one comment: "Federal government provides poor service at high cost." When asked who should assume child care responsibility if both parents are employed, the first choice by respondents was "private profit day care centers," followed by "private non-profit day care centers." The "federal government" was their last choice. While there are many criticisms among day care experts against profit-making day care centers (Goldman, 1975:80), to the respondents who value "efficiency," profit-making day care centers are the best answer.

Others are fearful of federal involvement in day care because of the possibility that day care centers may be used by the State as the tool

for introducing a number of undesirable values and ultimately for autocratic social control. Respondents' reluctance to support federal involvement in day care is clearly seen in responses to two questions. If the response to the questionnaire is representative of public attitude, the public are not against day care, but many are against federal involvement in it.

While this public attitude works against federal support of day care programs, a realistic appraisal of the facts leads to the conclusion that great number of children are in urgent need of day care, no matter what public ideas about proper relationship between mother and young children, the employment of mothers, and parental responsibility might be. This cannot be solved until the federal government assumes the responsibility to see that children are given good and comprehensive care during their developmental stage. According to Evelyn Moore, "the federal government has no choice: it must play a decisive, affirmative role in the establishment of quality comprehensive child development centers" (1972:52).

When we look back the Depression or World War II, we know that it is not an impossible task to develop an extensive federally supported day care program. But, how can the United States develop a federally supported day care program now when the majority of the public are reluctant to endorse it?

More than anything else a sense of urgency and the new commitment of large number of citizens are needed. To achieve this, the attitudes of the public toward day care must change. According to Elinor Guggenheimer, "The problem that we face now is to educate the public on the dangers of child neglect and on the importance of giving every child the best health, educational and social services of which the country is capable" (1973:597).

A grass-roots effort must be made to overcome the indifference to current inadequate child care. The idea that child care responsibility belongs exclusively to parents and that mothers with young children should stay home must be changed. Also, fears of undermining the family, of the federal government snatching children away from their parents, or of lessening a mother's sense of responsibility must be mitigated.

Only when the public understands the need and importance of day care programs for their children and begin to make their feelings known to elected officials--mayors, city council persons, state legislators, governors, members of Congress, and the President--will a national day care program for all children become a reality.

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